

A Modified 4/3/2 Activity: Are Listener Check-Sheets Beneficial?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss observations on student performance kept in a teaching journal written over the course of 5 weeks at a private university in Tokyo. This journal focused on the addition of a new task to the 3/2/1 fluency activity, which is a core component of Rikkyo University's English Discussion Course (EDC) curriculum, and is a modified version of Maurice's 4/3/2 activity (1989). This activity has been linked to improved fluency by giving students three chances to repeat a talk with three different listeners. I will discuss how the addition of a listener note-taking task influenced a key speaker task: repeating, as verbatim as possible, what students said in the first round of speaking in the second and third rounds. I will also discuss interesting observations of changes that this modification seemed to bring about as well as new difficulties it created for students and for myself.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of the 4/3/2 activity (3/2/1 activity in the EDC program) – fluency gains through repetition as well as time pressure – has been supported by studies on its effects on fluency (Boers, 2014). Nation and Newton (2009) describe the key features of a fluency activity as: 1. The activity is meaning-focused; 2. The learners take part in activities where all the language items are within their previous experience; and 3. There is support and encouragement for the learner to perform at higher than normal level. If these features are present, students can be expected to make fluency gains. The 3/2/1 activity achieves the first goal by emphasizing that students focus on the ideas, not the grammar. The second feature is addressed by using carefully selected topical questions that students are familiar with. Reduced time to complete the activity describes the third feature, making this a suitable fluency-building activity. Some research has been done on the efficacy of this activity. Boers (2014) found that “[during the second and third stages of the 4/3/2 activity] the sheer amount of verbatim repetition [was] striking” (p. 228). It is thought that thinking of what to talk about and deciding how to say it places demands on the cognitive faculties of a speaker. With repetition, there is no need for a speaker to go through these first two stages, and he or she can simply access the available content already shared in the first talk.

In a 4/3/2 study measuring long term fluency gains, De Jong and Perfetti found that “speech repetition in the 4/3/2 task may cause changes in underlying cognitive mechanisms, resulting in a long-term and transferrable effect on performance fluency” (2011, p.563). Boers also found evidence that accuracy suffers as a result of time pressure. In the EDC classroom, however, the focus is predominantly on fluency over accuracy. Long-term negative effects on accuracy, let alone fluency, have yet to be conclusively demonstrated through studies on the 4/3/2 activity, so this is not a major concern for this project. It would be fair to point out the variety of interpretations of what exactly entails fluency and accuracy and where and how much they overlap. Fluency in the EDC classroom is defined based on Schmidt's (1992) definition: “...fluency is based around the development of procedural knowledge... to develop students' abilities to use English to communicate meaningfully in real time” (Hurling, 2012, pp. 1-2). With this definition in mind, the focus is on having balanced, interactive, and group-constructed discussions for up to 16 minutes with minimal feedback on grammar usage, pronunciation, or word choice errors and a lot of emphasis on fluency.

One of the benefits of this fluency activity is the promotion of automaticity, as suggested by Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988). The authors suggest that the fluency activities can help students develop utterance selection skills. They fairly add the caveat that a second aspect of fluency, “the actual production of these utterances” (p. 473), is more difficult to measure. In the EDC context, some semantic priming may also be taking place, due to the 3/2/1 questions being indirectly related to the discussion topics. As the primary goal of EDC discussion classes is for students to participate fluently in group discussions on a variety of familiar and contemporary topics, the fluency activity naturally has been designed to prepare students for the discussion as well as introduce a fluency element into the lesson from the start.

Issues

During the first few weeks of the Fall 2016 semester, I observed class performance and behavior and decided to focus on this part of the EDC lesson. Generally speaking, the activity is a staple activity in a typical EDC lesson. I personally felt that the activity was very valuable not only as a warm up activity and a fluency building activity, but also as a means to activate possible vocabulary for the discussions to follow. However, I was not satisfied with some students’ performance during the activity. I felt that some aspect of the activity could be adjusted or modified to make it more useful to the students and to help the EDC course achieve its aims. The following points that I found problematic related to some key aspects of the 3/2/1 activity discussed above.

1. *Focusing on ideas rather than grammar, student’s familiarity with the topic questions, and student reactions to time pressure.* There were perceived problems from the student side as well as problems faced in the classroom by this teacher. For example, how could I assess more than one student’s successful performance of the activity? Should I spend valuable class time explaining the purpose of the activity or should I let students figure it out as we went through the semester? Given the strict schedule and time limitations of a 1.5-hour weekly discussion class, explaining the purpose of this activity seemed like it could be overwhelming for quite a few students.
2. *Repetition.* Were students actually repeating verbatim the ideas they discussed in the first three-minute talk? Another point that concerned me was whether the students could actually remember what they had said in the first talk. In my own observations of student performance of this activity with previous classes, I found some students completely changing the talks in the second and third rounds.
3. *Lack of motivation to repeat everything.* Some students would use long fillers and pauses, seemingly just to pass the time and get through the activity.
4. *The role of listeners in the activity.* In EDC lessons, teachers are encouraged to push listeners to “react naturally” using interjections and rejoinders to show interest. However, some students merely repeated the same expressions, such as “oh!” or “wow!” seemingly without regard to what was being spoken. They appeared to shut down while listening to certain students. Although not specifically related to the purpose of the 3-2-1 activity, I felt that experimenting with the listener’s role would make the activity more enjoyable and challenging for everyone involved.
5. *The face-to-face nature of the talks.* Students are paired up and standing face to face. As some students are uncomfortable with direct eye contact, the activity seemed to induce

some anxiety for a few individuals. Originally, the idea for a note-taking element was intuitively based on the perceived problems listed above. Over the course of about five weeks I informally took notes on the above situations or perceived problems, and tried some variations. Initially, I had selected a relatively advanced class along with a lower level class. As the journal process continued and I adapted my journal taking strategy, I was able to identify similar patterns across all of my classes. The journal used for this paper is based on notes taken randomly in a stream-of-consciousness format from any of the 12 classes I taught in the Fall 2016 semester.

DISCUSSION

The change I decided to implement in the 3/2/1 activity is as follows. At the start of each lesson, after students have completed a reading quiz, they are given half of an A4 sheet of paper. On one side are two or three questions the speakers will talk about. As mentioned earlier, these questions are indirectly related to the topic of discussion. Some classes were given space to write ideas. This was a variation on the activity that other EDC teachers have implemented with varying degrees of reported success (one that I, too, would experiment with during the semester). The other side of the sheet had reactions for listeners to use during the listening phase of the activity. To deal with some of the problems and issues I was having with the activity, I added a check sheet, which is included in the appendix for reference.

Students had already been doing the standard 3/2/1 activity for several weeks, so the introduction of a new element was at first confusing for some of them. One point that challenged several students was taking adequate notes. Another problem had to do with writing. Some of the EDC students were not capable of writing in English. For these students I suggested using Japanese script, and I encouraged them not to worry about spelling mistakes. The note-taking element is introduced like this:

- For round 1, students are instructed to take “simple notes”. Other instructions include “write key words” and “try to take a lot of notes!” After giving an example of this during the introduction of the activity, I let the students try it in the fluency activity of the lesson.
- During round 1 of the activity, speakers and listeners are decided, they stand up and line up at the front of the classroom and begin. Speakers talk about the two questions as instructed. The key instructions during this activity are to try to keep talking at a “normal speed”, and to try to talk about both (or all three) of the questions. The listeners are instructed to react naturally and to write down as many key words from the talk as they can.
- When the first three-minute speaking phase is finished, the speakers rotate while the listeners remain in their positions (I will discuss some of the logistical problems this new activity in more detail below). To assess what kind of notes are being taken take a brief look at some of the listeners’ note sheets, and praise or encourage them to “Try to take more notes!”
- In the second round of the activity, the speakers are instructed to “repeat everything!” and to “speak faster!” Listeners are given a simpler task than in round 1. With the notes they have received from the neighboring listener, they now have to mark a check if their partner repeats one of the key words. They are also instructed to react to the speakers talk as they did in round 1. After the second round is finished, the speakers can have a look at the check

sheet. The students seem to enjoy this part, as they may notice a particular point they forgot, or that they were able to repeat everything.

- Finally, in the third round, the same instructions are given, perhaps with a question to a student such as “Do you think you can repeat everything from round 1?” The speakers try to repeat the same information speaking “even faster!” and listeners put checks into the boxes with key words and react. The same reactions are encouraged as after the second round.

One of the observations I had was that students were often eager to have a look at the listener check sheets to confirm how much they were able to repeat. This point is what I feel is one of the successes of this variation on the 3/2/1 activity. Compared to a standard 3/2/1, note taking seemed to “up the ante” and make the activity more of a challenge and more fun. Certainly, the standard 3/2/1 activity has a game element to it, and in classes that did not use note-taking as a measure of achievement, I observed students who would rise to the challenge of repeating everything and speaking faster. However, the difference was noticeable with most classes that used the check sheets.

The first problem I will discuss is the issue of students whose efforts at increasing fluency are jeopardized by a concern over grammatical accuracy. After four weeks of encouraging students to focus on communicating their ideas fluently and not worrying about grammatical accuracy, the issue was not a major concern. By this time in the semester, most students are aware of this aspect of the course. There are occasional examples of students pausing for lengthy periods of time, however. Post-activity questions such as “Why couldn’t you continue talking smoothly?” elicited responses such as “I didn’t have any ideas of what to say” or “I didn’t know how to say it”. Clearly, individual preferences still influence student behavior in this activity. Some students’ personal desire to speak with accurate grammar may outweigh the explicitly stated goals of the activity. For most students, however, it does appear that the activity seems to reinforce this emphasis on content over form. Adding a checklist may also have helped to reinforce this outcome goal by adding another pressuring element to communicate a message smoothly.

Lack of familiarity with question topics was an issue that often seemed to lead to disfluency. Often, there were students who simply stopped talking, or paused for five seconds or more. The most common explanation for this behavior was that they simply ran out of ideas, or had no idea of what to say. Based on this observation, I attempted what many instructors at EDC have done before: give students time before the activity to think of ideas, or in some lower level classes, to write down their ideas. The benefits of this preparation time are unclear, however some students indicated that it helped them in the activity.

Time pressure is an essential feature of the 3/2/1 activity. Students respond favorably to this aspect of the activity and treat it as a challenge to say everything in the allotted time. However, some students appeared to ignore the time imposition and speak at a similar rate throughout the three rounds. I wanted to address this issue but found the repeated reminders to “repeat as much as you can” and questions such as “Did you repeat everything?” or “Could you speak faster?” were falling on deaf ears more often than not. One response to this nonchalant attitude toward the activity was to try to understand these students’ particular difficulty or reluctance. Some students stated that they simply could not speak faster while others forgot as they were more focused on remembering content. One way I addressed this situation was to praise their desire to communicate, while also urging them to keep trying to improve their fluency, as this was the goal of the activity. Using a check sheet seemed to help some of these students. One example is that when a student was speaking at a normal rate in the second round of the activity,

the listener partner would point to the check sheet. This reminder and visual cue showed the speaker that they had more topics to cover. Some listeners were more explicit with instructions such as “speak faster!” Additionally, my own pre-round instructions evolved according to the class and the situation. Sometimes I would use simple prompts before the round started. For example, I would say “Repeat round 1 ideas!”, “Speak as fast as you can!” or simply “Round 2! Faster!” Pre-round questions were sometimes directed to one student or to the group. A question such as “Can you repeat everything?” were met with uncertainty (“Maybe...”) or more optimistic replies (“I think so!” or “Yes!”).

Measuring the percentage of content that students are able to repeat in a 3/2/1 activity is not a simple task. One way to measure fluency gains is through transcription. While this would be the most thorough and accurate measure, it is a time-consuming one. One common solution is asking students whether they were able to repeat everything in a standard 3/2/1 activity (without check sheets). From my observations, it seemed that students were often not sure as to how much they were able to repeat. I was not satisfied with this approach for several reasons. One reason was that it required teacher intervention in an activity that could easily be handled entirely by the students. Repeating the same questions, comments or instructions in every lesson can become monotonous. Perhaps a negative effect is that students tune out when instructions are given. As I discussed previously, using a mixture of questions and instructions, (as well as praise and playful criticism) helped to assess generally how much students were able to repeat. Using a check sheet created a more concrete way for students and myself to measure success in the activity. After the second round of the activity with check sheets, most speakers were eager to have a look at it to see how much they were able to repeat or whether they had forgotten some talking point.

Explaining the purpose of the activity was generally not a problem, but as I mentioned some students did not seem to fully understand it. For example, some students were omitting entire sentences or actually producing one-word answers to the topic questions. This behavior seemed to me to be mainly related to student ability. Lower-level students were the most likely students to omit entire sentences or use simple phrases such as “High school...Basketball...fun” in the second or third rounds of the activity (On several occasions this was a cheeky way to “cheat” the game). I observed similar examples in the first round of the activity as well, but more often than not, I found it with less advanced learners. For these students, I sometimes reviewed the purpose of the activity after finishing. Giving examples of simple, complete sentences such as “In high school I played basketball. It was fun.” were usually adequate reminders of the purpose of the activity. Check sheets did not seem to have any impact on this behavior, however. In some cases, using a check sheet appeared to encourage one-word answers. This was not a common behavior and more often than not was done in jest. However, to me it highlights how the game aspect of using a check list can reinforce the target of this activity.

One aspect of the 3/2/1 activity that does not seem clear is the actual meaning of “verbatim repetition”. de Jong and Perfetti suggest that verbatim repetition is what leads to actual fluency gains via automatization while Nation (1989) looked at whether syntactic complexity, specifically subordination, increased. For the purposes of an EDC 3/2/1 activity, simplifying instructions for students to “Try to repeat everything” seems to be understood by students. My own informal observations of individual students over the three rounds of this activity indicate that most students are repeating most of what they say verbatim in proceeding rounds. Introducing the note-taking element to the activity seemed to help with one difficult aspect of performing the repetition: memory. I observed (and experienced during my own training) the difficulty of remembering a talk that I had not prepared beforehand. Students often forget the order of their ideas from round to round as well as certain points they may have mentioned previously. One adaptation that I attempted in several of my classes was to suggest to more forgetful students that they take a look

at their (listening) partners notes whenever they couldn't remember what they had said. I noticed also that listeners sometimes showed the speaker the notes, pointed to a key word, or simply prompted them with a key word so they could quickly resume their talk.

In most classes, I observed the occasional student who seemed unmotivated to even attempt to repeat their ideas from round to round. These were the students who sometimes gave different talks or brought up new points in the second and third rounds of the activity. Again, this desire to communicate an idea they feel is important is not something I am comfortable with criticizing, but to attempt the 3/2/1 activity requires an acceptance of its basic structure and rules. The use of a check sheet seemed to motivate these students to follow the rules. The reasons for going off track could be varied, from simple lack of interest, low willingness to communicate, to lack of focus. Regardless of the reason, having notes in front of speakers in their listening partner's hands, with the listeners waiting to check the next box, seemed to help keep speakers focused on the goals of the activity.

The final points that came up repeatedly in my thoughts on the activity and in my journal notes had to do with the role of the listener in this activity. The two points I felt needed addressing were reactions and eye contact. For some students, listening to a partner talk for up to three minutes can be a taxing ordeal. Some students appeared to shut down at times, or to resort to repeating similar reactions such as "oh" or "wow". At EDC, students are urged to "react!" and to "use natural reactions!" To my mind, this emphasis on reactions can be a little extreme. I have met students who apparently had been taught to react to every utterance their partner makes. Other students sit silently listening, giving no indication apart from an occasional glance or a soft "mmm" (which is a common reaction in Japan). Distinguishing the cause for one student's constant indications of interest and understanding and the others silent concentration is another topic altogether. Suffice to say that I wanted to balance these two extremes. I also wanted to keep the listeners focused on their role in the activity. Adding the check sheet element to the 3/2/1 activity did not lessen the use of reactions as far as I could tell. In fact, I noticed a more natural use of one communication skill as an active listening tool. This skill is called "Checking Understanding" in the EDC course book. Students who were taking notes often repeated words that their partner used as a means of listening actively or checking understanding. The use of check sheets in this activity also provided a way to increase the use of natural reactions in some students who were reticent. One way that I adapted to these shy or unsure students was to say "Every time you check a box, give a simple reaction." In this way, more shy students were able to use reactions more frequently. For higher-level students, this instruction was unnecessary but still useful. They also used more reactions, including reflecting or paraphrasing the speaker's words. One unexpected result of using check sheets addressed a problem I found with the 3/2/1 activity regarding eye contact. This manifests itself particularly in a face-to-face activity such as the 3/2/1 activity. For individuals who experience social anxiety, eye contact can be anxiety inducing. Because listeners have to look at their note sheet as they listen and take notes, they have few opportunities to make long, sustained eye contact with their partner. For more shy students, this seemed to free them up to listen in their own particular way, all the while using natural English reactions. Another possible benefit is for speakers with the same difficulties. Perhaps they too could benefit from the freedom from eye contact while they try their best to remember and repeat their talks in the high-pressure activity that is 3/2/1.

A final comment on one aspect of class behavior has to do with the group dynamic during the 3/2/1 activity. Based on my observations from the previous semester and from my journal entries, students generally seem to enjoy the 3/2/1. In a group discussion class, it is one of the few chances they have to talk simply to one person, and to freely share their opinions with no follow-up questions or other students interrupting. With the addition of a simple check sheet, I detected

a slightly increased sense of group autonomy. Students did not need me to ask “How much did you repeat?” or “Did you speak faster?” They also seemed to have more of a stake in the outcome due to the pressure of taking good notes which would be passed along to the next listener in the next round. I observed that the 3/2/1 activity with check sheets seemed to create a situation that fostered group cohesion and teamwork. The simple act of passing notes, looking at the abundance (or lack) of notes also created a talking point amongst the students. Partly thanks to the keeping of a journal, I have a new interest in this topic of student autonomy.

CONCLUSION

Observing and journaling about one specific activity made for an interesting, if not slightly overwhelming, journal project. Many aspects of student performance and behavior came to my attention that otherwise would have been forgotten or ignored. I did not expect to have so many points that I felt worth exploring. Although the focus of my intervention was mainly on adding a new element to the 3/2/1 activity, I also adapted aspects of my teaching such as instructional language, feedback techniques and classroom management. The check sheet activity is one that I will continue to use, adapt, and hopefully improve for the benefit of future students and for any instructors who would like to explore its value.

This journaling project has opened up a wide range of student behaviors and performance issues that I would like to study in the future. In addition to student autonomy, I would like to learn more about the role of English teachers in highly autonomous classes, the role of technology in creating these autonomous classes as well as the role of English instructors in the high-tech classrooms of the future.

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APPENDIX – A completed post-round 3 check sheet

(None of these notes are from actual student utterances, but simply provide an ideal example of notes taken during the 3-2-1 activity. The questions are taken from a level 3 textbook, Unit 3 “Making Friends at University”).

1. What did you enjoy doing with your friends when you were younger?
2. What are fun things to do with friends at university?

Round 1	R2	R3	Round 1	R2	R3	Round 1	R2	R3
Elementary	✓	✓	Baseball	✓		University	✓	✓
Play baseball	✓	✓	Soccer	✓		Sports		
Videogames	✓	✓	Not good			Videogames		
Fun	✓		But every day	✓		Talking to friends	✓	✓
Friends house		✓	High school	✓	✓	Making friends	✓	✓
Junior high	✓	✓	Sports	✓	✓	Go karaoke	✓	✓
Sports	✓	✓	Videogames		✓			